

AUDIO

FAQ

Q What is a podcast, and how do I make one?

A A podcast is an ordinary audio file, usually an MP3, that's made available for download over the internet. The unique feature of podcasts is that the files are linked from an RSS feed, making it easy for listeners to find, download and keep track of files as they're uploaded.

Various programs, including iTunes, allow you to subscribe to podcasts, which you can then listen to on your PC or transfer to your MP3 player.

To create your own simple spoken-word podcast, all you need is a microphone and some audio-editing software, such as Audacity, which is available for free from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>.

The next step is to find somewhere online to put your podcast. If you have your own website, free software such as Podifier (<http://www.podifier.com>) will help you create and upload the necessary files.

There are also websites that offer free podcast hosting, although many have terms and conditions that give them permission to use your work in other contexts or to restrict your content.

Kat Orphanides

Printers and audio expert

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BEHRINGER Podcaststudio USB

★★★★

£71 inc VAT

Behringer's Podcaststudio has everything you need to create high-quality podcasts. It includes headphones, a microphone, a mixing console and a five-channel mixer that connects to your PC by USB. It also comes with a CD of audio-editing and podcasting software.

The quick start guide provides accurate instructions on connecting the hardware, but installing the driver is much more complicated. Instead of an installation routine, a readme file on the CD instructs you to copy a file to the 'system32' directory, but doesn't give its full location (c:\windows\system32). Copying the file was simple, but we'd expect an automatic installation.

For editing your podcasts, Podcaststudio includes a copy of Audacity, an open-source editor. It's powerful, although beginners could find it a little overwhelming. If you're in any doubt, try it out by downloading it from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>. There's also a copy of Podifier (www.podifier.com), a free, easy-to-use utility to help you publish your finished work.

The bundled HPM1000 closed-ear headphones are uncomfortable but sound good, producing warm bass and clear treble. We were more impressed by the Ultravoice XM8500 dynamic microphone. Its sturdy metal body feels expensive and it has a high-quality XLR connector. It produced clear recordings without popping or picking up lots of background noise.

The Xenyx 502 is Behringer's entry-level mixer, but with five channels it's more than adequate for even the most complicated podcast. Channel 1 has an XLR input for microphones, and can also



take input from a 1/4in phono connector if the mic is unplugged. The mixer can handle a further two stereo or four mono inputs through 1/4in sockets. The Xenyx 502 has a basic two-band equaliser and controls for adjusting the level and balance of incoming audio.

The quality of tracks recorded with the Podcaststudio was reasonable, if not quite up to the professional level claimed on the box. There was some hiss on recordings made on our test laptop, but vocals sounded clear. It's not the ideal choice for music production, but it didn't fare badly when we plugged a guitar into it. However, audio from an MP3 player connected to the line in sockets sounded filtered and distant, with poor clarity.

We were impressed by the microphone, and

recording our podcast was easy.

However, our recordings suffered from slight hiss, the headphones were too uncomfortable for long sessions and beginners may find Audacity tricky to use.

If you want to create high-quality podcasts, you might like to consider M-Audio's Podcast Factory (*Shopper* November 2006), which costs around £80 and has a slightly less complicated mixer, a selection of audio samples and a copy of Ableton Live Lite.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of inputs
- ✓ Excellent microphone
- ✗ Uncomfortable headphones

PODCAST HARDWARE Dynamic XLR microphone, mixer with XLR, 1/4in phono inputs and twin RCA input/output, USB control interface with twin RCA input/output, closed-ear headphones. Software requires Windows 2000, XP, 1GHz processor, 128MB RAM
PART CODE PODCASTUDIOUSB
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com
DETAILS www.behringer.com

Also consider...

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT

BEST BUY Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite a basic device, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3/8mm socket audio output. Requires Windows 2000/XP
SUPPLIER www.broadbandstuff.co.uk
DETAILS www.philips.com
 ✓ Good value ✗ Screen hard to read
FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

BEST BUY The X-230s sound clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50 and quite a few that are more expensive than that. If you're looking for a good set for music or games, there are no better speakers available at this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1, 32W power, 3/8mm stereo cable inputs
PART CODE 970123-1120
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.logitech.com
 ✓ Excellent sound quality ✗ Cabling is awkward
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£149 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!

BEST BUY Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sound to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for a PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power
PART CODE 970191-0120
SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk
DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk
 ✓ Sound great; loads of features ✗ Expensive
FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

MAXELL HP-NC22

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT



Maxell's HP-NC22 noise-cancelling headphones are made in the same factory as Bose's Quiet Comfort 3 headphones, and you can tell from their design.



The padded cups are comfortable, even for long sessions. The right earpiece houses an AAA battery, and the left a 3½mm socket and switch.

The noise cancellation feature is among the best we've heard. It cut out low-frequency noise in our tests without a large increase in either volume or high-frequency hiss. However, with the noise cancellation disabled, the audio was a little muddy compared with that from Audio Technica's QuietPoint ATH-ANC7 headphones, which won our Most Wanted award in *Shopper* July 2007.

The HP-NC22s aren't cheap, but they're worth every penny if you're serious about your audio.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ✓ Effective noise cancellation
- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✗ Expensive

NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES

20-20,000Hz, sensitivity 99dB (with power on) 102dB (with power off), 3½mm stereo jack plug, ¼in and airline adaptors, 50cm connector cable, 1m extension cable. Requires one AAA battery.
PART CODE 303310.00.CN
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.maxell.eu.com

XTREMEMAC Luna

★★★★

£70 inc VAT



XtremeMac's Luna is an iPod dock alarm clock. It has an AM/FM radio tuner and an auxiliary input, but it can't connect a docked iPod to your PC. It looks a lot like a traditional radio alarm clock, which may disappoint more style-conscious iPod owners.

The Luna comes with a remote control, but complex tasks, such as setting the alarm and time, can only be done by navigating a confusing menu system with the poorly labelled control knobs on the main unit.

The audio quality is slightly tinny, and the treble can be fuzzy at high volumes, but the bass is clear. Once set up, using the alarm is simple and you can wake to music from your iPod, FM radio or a buzzer. There's a screen dimmer to help keep your room dark, and a sleep timer so you can drift off to your favourite tunes.

The Luna's confusing controls put us off slightly, so we'd rather buy iHome's iH5 (*Shopper* October 200), which is a little more expensive but is easier to use.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ✓ Screen dimmer
- ✓ Easy to use once set up
- ✗ Unintuitive controls

IPOD ALARM CLOCK 3½mm stereo line in, AM/FM radio, iPod dock
PART CODE IPD-LUN-02
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.xtrememac.com

CHOOSING A... Speaker System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

SURROUND FORMAT: Stereo

RMS POWER: 5W

INPUTS: 1x analogue

BUILT-IN DECODING: None

Recommended minimum in grey

1 PC speaker systems, which consist of speakers and an amplifier to power them, can cost anything from £5 to £300. The cheapest sets, with the specifications shown in grey above, will be fine for those who simply want to play Windows alert noises on a PC they use solely for work.

2 Those who use their PC for any kind of entertainment should go for a better system. The first thing to look for is a subwoofer, which handles bass frequencies, while the satellites output mid- and high-frequency sounds.

Other than this, the best way to establish the quality of a system is to consult our reviews. Specifications don't tell you much and the price of a system often bears little relation to its actual performance.

3 Games and DVDs will benefit greatly from a surround-sound system. The standard surround configuration is 5.1, which consists of five satellite speakers and one subwoofer, but those who must have the latest technologies should consider 6.1 or 7.1 speakers, plus a compatible sound card that is capable of supporting the extended Dolby Digital EX format.

4 The power rating can give you a rough idea of how loud the speakers will go. Ignore PMPO or Peak Power ratings, which can be as much as 40 times the RMS figure.

A 50W RMS system should provide ample volume for a desktop PC, but for a home cinema look for 100W RMS or more.

5 Stereo speakers need only a single analogue stereo input, while a 5.1 system needs three. Surround-sound systems that incorporate Dolby Digital decoders must be fed through an S/PDIF digital input, which comes in (non-compatible) coaxial and optical versions. However, as Dolby Digital decoding can be handled in software, surround speakers with analogue inputs are far more cost-effective.

LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given no iPod has its own. You can't synchronise a docked iPod with your PC, but the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS iPod dock connector and 3½mm stereo line input, composite/S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power PART CODE 970217-0120 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk
✓ Clear, loud sound ✗ No iPod dock connector FULL REVIEW Jan 2007

IRHYTHMS A-211

★★★★★

£103



iRhythms' A-211 produces the best sound quality and volume we've ever heard from iPod dock speakers. The large subwoofer produced deep bass tones, while the satellites gave us crisp, detailed middle and high frequencies. It's a great dock at a great price.



IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 133W RMS power, compatible with all docking iPods and first-generation shuffle, auxiliary line input PART CODE LN 16326 SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk DETAILS www.irhythms.co.uk
✓ High-quality sound ✗ No USB data connection FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

SCANDYNA Micropod SE Active

★★★★

£163 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!

Scandyna's gorgeous Micropod speakers offer higher-quality sound than most compact speaker systems. Their smooth, focused tone complements their beautiful design. This speaker set is expensive, but if you want a system that looks as good as it sounds, it's perfect.



2.0 SPEAKERS Line input, 20W RMS power PART CODE AMSE05-P SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.podspeakers.com
✓ Beautiful design; great sound ✗ Expensive FULL REVIEW Oct 2007